

Western Spotted Skunk

SCIENTIFIC NAME: The Western spotted skunk's scientific name, *Spilogale gracilis*, comes from the Greek words *spilo*, meaning "spotted," and *gale*, meaning "weasel," and the Latin *gracilis*, meaning "slender."

DESCRIPTION: Characterized as the smallest of skunks, the Western spotted skunk is about the size of a half-grown domestic cat and has the slender elongated appearance of a weasel. The Western spotted skunk is black with white markings on the nose in the shape of a triangle; a spot behind each ear; and four to six broken stripes along the neck, back and sides. The interrupted pattern of the stripes gives the appearance of spots, earning the Western spotted skunk its name. The end of the tail also is tipped in white.

DISTRIBUTION: Found throughout the western United States into southern British Columbia and south into central and western Mexico, it can inhabit a range in elevation from sea level to as high as 7,000 feet.

HABITAT: It is believed the Western spotted skunk resides in various habitats across Arizona, even though little is known about the species. In the desert, this creature generally is found in or near riparian areas. It also inhabits lower-elevation mountain regions around the state. This creature also prefers rocky areas where it can hide in crevices or piles of rocks. In an urban setting, the Western spotted skunk is found in mountain parks and may use intact desert washes to traverse the city.

BIOLOGY: The Western spotted skunk is nocturnal. Activity usually begins around dusk and continues until dawn. During the day it retreats into rock crevices, abandoned burrows, hollow trees or dens that it excavates. This species remains active throughout the year.

The Western spotted skunk is an omnivore, but feeds primarily on small mammals and a variety of insects. Other tasty treats include lizards, eggs, carrion and occasionally plant matter.

The skunk breeds in September and early October. Depending on environmental conditions, development of the fertilized egg may

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STATUS: Uncommon and secretive.

MANAGEMENT NEEDS: Skunks can become nuisances. To prevent them from living in or near your home, do not leave pet food outside. In addition, remove brush piles or stacks of wood, which create inviting hiding places for skunks. Also, locate any holes under your



pause, remaining in a state of "arrested development" for up to 200 days.

The Western spotted skunk has a pair of scent glands under the base of its tail, which can release a powerful musk when a skunk is threatened. Before spraying, a skunk usually gives several warnings. The first warning occurs when a skunk stamps its front feet, as if having a tantrum. If the threat continues, the skunk then will stand on its front feet and aim its hindquarters toward the threat. Actual spraying occurs only as a final resort if the threat persists.

home or spaces around pipes and fill them with cement or heavy-duty wire cloth to prevent skunks from living in crawl spaces.

If a skunk does take up residence, bait a live trap with some dry cat food. Contact animal control after the skunk has been trapped. Remember that skunks can carry rabies; do not handle a trap with a skunk in it. 🦨

■ Jared Underwood is the nongame small mammals conservation coordinator for the Arizona Game and Fish Department.